

Great Ming 371

Chapter 371: The Need for a Rigid Person

Li Daoxuan held a cup of jasmine latte, gazing down at Heyang County from the sky. He felt a little nervous, genuinely worried that the figures from his village militia might bully the common citizens of Heyang County.

This was the first time the Gaojia Village Militia had ventured into a “wild figure-populated town.” In such a place, incidents of bullying the weak were all too likely to erupt.

This marked the militia’s first major test of integrity and discipline.

Li Daoxuan knew he was partial to his own people. If his figures bullied the wild figures, how should he respond? Turning a blind eye was unacceptable, but harsh punishment was something he found hard to stomach.

Quite a dilemma.

At this moment, he gained a deeper understanding of why corruption festered in this world, why eunuchs seized power, why treacherous ministers thrived...

It all stemmed from the “supreme leader’s” favoritism toward “his own people.”

Favoritism bred exceptions, and exceptions led to the collapse of law and order.

You know it’s wrong, but when your own people throw tantrums, complain, and threaten suicide before your eyes, how many could truly hold firm?

If your relative stole a thousand coins from the neighbor, could you really bring yourself to call the authorities?

If your closest friend slashed someone with a Western Knife while drunk, would you drag him to the constabulary, or give him travel money to buy a boat ticket and flee?

You might easily type “I stand with justice” online to proclaim yourself full of righteousness, but when it’s your turn to choose... it’s far harder than typing on a keyboard.

Li Daoxuan pondered silently. It seemed establishing a “law enforcement agency” was necessary. Since he couldn’t manage with an iron fist, he’d find someone who could to help him govern...

Now, while his influence wasn’t too vast, it was still timely to create this “law enforcement agency.”

But who should serve as the enforcer?

This person must be rigid and inflexible!

They must prioritize law over personal feelings and value justice above all else. To uphold justice, they should even be willing to confront him directly, correcting his “favoritism and exceptions,” much like the famous Tang Dynasty minister Wei Zheng, who dared to point out the emperor’s faults.

Did he have such a figure among his people?

His mind flooded with chaotic thoughts as he anxiously watched his figures move below.

Fortunately, long-term ideological education and discipline had made the Gaojia Village Militia soldiers behave properly. A squad walked up to a food stall, greeting the owner cheerfully: “Boss, how much for a bowl of your Three Ponds Knife-Shaved Noodles?”

The owner, intimidated by their armor, answered timidly, “Ten coins.”

The soldiers: “Whoa, so expensive?”

“In Gaojia Village, a bowl of hand-pulled noodles is only three coins.”

“I suppose grain must cost more here.”

“The Deity’s grace has only just reached this county; its grain isn’t as abundant as ours in Gaojia Village yet.”

“Oh, that makes sense.”

“One bowl for me!”

“One for me too!”

The owner felt uneasy. These men ordered five bowls—fifty coins. If they refused to pay later, he’d suffer a terrible loss.

But a glance at their armor and weapons silenced any “we don’t serve soldiers” protests. He steeled himself and began shaving noodles.

His worries proved unnecessary. Before the noodles were even ready, the soldiers took out pieces of silver worth about fifty coins, placing them before him. “Hurry up with the noodles! We’re starving!”

Delighted, the owner swept the silver into his drawer. His shaving grew faster, and his mood lifted.

Similar scenes played out all over Heyang County. Over a thousand militia members from Gaojia Village, plus the three hundred cavalry camp troops, instantly made several streets buzz with activity.

The people of Gaojia Village were well-off, but militiamen and cavalymen were richer still. Their jobs carried mortal risks, so the Deity paid them far more than ordinary laborers.

Their purchasing power was substantial.

The knife-shaved noodle shop quickly filled. The Heyang Xuemian shop was packed. The Fresh Water Hele shop bustled with people...

Merchants across Heyang County were overjoyed.

Business this time was fantastic.

The only slight annoyance was the disparaging comments they often overheard. For instance, a soldier eating Fresh Water Hele remarked between mouthfuls, “Ah, Heyang County is truly a poor place.”

His companion agreed, “Utterly impoverished. Compared to our Gaojia Village, it’s not even in the same league.”

Hearing this, the owner nearly blew his beard off with anger. Darescall us Heyang folks poor? I ought to knock you with a ladle! Ah... but they carried bows and knives. Better not.

Then he remembered those three girls who’d eaten Fresh Water Hele at his shop earlier. They’d urged him to open a Fresh Water Hele shop in Gaojia Village, saying its citizens were wealthy and he’d earn much more.

He glanced at his shop full of Gaojia Villagers. They certainly seemed prosperous. When the girls mentioned it, he’d only half-listened. But now... Gaojia Village might truly be worth visiting.

Meanwhile...

Down east, a lamb cake shop was also bustling with festive activity.

Lamb Cake, introduced during the Yuan Dynasty when Mongolians occupied Heyang County, was rich in flavor—oily and delicious. Its only drawback was requiring lamb, which was pricey.

In this year of severe drought, who could afford to raise sheep?

Plus, Fan Shanyue had wreaked havoc for several years. Finding a live sheep in Heyang County was hard. This shop's secret backer was Zhang Yuanwai of Xiazhuang Village, who sourced a little lamb enabling them to run the shop. Patrons were usually prominent locals.

But today, a group of Gaojia Village Militia Soldiers entered. At their lead was Zheng Daniu, who swaggered inside with five Grenade Troops soldiers.

Seeing their enlisted appearance, the owner thought they couldn't afford the food. But when he named what he considered an "exorbitant" price, Zheng Daniu roared with laughter: "This place has lamb? Wow, unusual! Sit down, lads. My treat! Six lamb cakes, shopkeep... Extra lamb, hold the cake."

Owner: "!!!"

The six soldiers sat around a table. One commented, "Big Brother Daniu, isn't something wrong? The cake is the main part. Lamb's just a snippet."

Zheng Daniu: "Eh? Really?"

Wryly, the owner explained: "Yes. Each bowl has only a few lamb slices. You eat it mainly for the cake."

Chapter 372: Ill Treat

Zheng Daniu made a face. "What's so good about cake? Isn't it just flour? I don't want to eat cake, I want to eat lamb."

The shopkeeper was torn between laughter and tears. "But I can't just give you a big bowl full of lamb, otherwise the small shop would suffer a loss."

The other five soldiers laughed along. "Brother Daniu, stop messing around; the shopkeeper will be ruined."

Their commotion happened to disturb Zao Ying as she was passing by the shop entrance.

Hearing the noise inside the shop, Zao Ying turned her head and glanced, relieved to see that the troublemakers weren't her own cavalry; then she watched with an amused attitude.

Zheng Daniu looked confused. "Would adding more lamb without cake really cause a loss?"

The shopkeeper wore a pained expression. "It definitely would cause a loss; lamb is expensive. In good times, a pound of lamb cost about eighty coins here, but in this great disaster year, it climbed to eight hundred coins; only in the last few days when Gaojia Village sent us lots of flour did the price of lamb drop back to four hundred coins a pound... If I add a few thin slices of lamb to a bowl of Lamb Cake, that bowl has to sell for fifty coins; adding more slices would bankrupt me."

Zheng Daniu looked bewildered and turned to the gunners beside him. "Huh? How many taels are four hundred coins?"

Someone nearby laughed. "Four taels."

Zheng Daniu scratched his head. "Exactly how much is four taels?"

The person beside him fell silent.

It was impossible to communicate with this fool using normal methods.

A gunner reached inside his coat, pulled out a very small piece of silver, and placed it on the table. "Brother Daniu, look, this small piece of silver is four taels."

Zheng Daniu pinched the piece of silver with two fingers and squinted at it with one eye for a long time. "Huh? So just a pound of lamb is equal to such a tiny bit of silver? That scared me—hearing four hundred, I thought it was a huge amount."

The others remained silent.

Zheng Daniu reached into his coat, pulled out a huge ingot of silver, and slapped it onto the table with a bang—it was really big, at least five taels—then thumped the table and declared. "Shopkeeper, take this ingot; bring as many pounds of lamb as it covers, and don't add cake as filler!"

The others stayed quiet.

The shopkeeper was stunned for a moment: was this the spending bravado of a common soldier? If not for your soldier's uniform, I'd have thought you were an official.

A gunner whispered. "Brother Daniu, even if you're rich, you shouldn't waste it; that much money could buy a pretty maid, and you shouldn't spend it treating us all to a meal."

Zheng Daniu laughed heartily. "Buy a maid? Aren't you afraid the Deity might slap you silly? Besides, even if the Deity allowed it, I don't want a maid—I can't eat her; I just want to enjoy good food, and I don't care about the rest."

"Pfft!" A woman's chuckle came from the shop entrance.

Everyone turned at the sound and spotted Zao Ying standing at the doorway holding her horse's reins; she must have listened for quite a while, and it was only when she laughed that they noticed her.

Zheng Daniu waved to Zao Ying. "Instructor Zao, anyone who sees this gets a share—come have some lamb, my treat."

Zao Ying chuckled and walked in, sitting boldly next to Zheng Daniu with her legs spread wide. "You just said you won't buy a maid? Why?"

Zheng Daniu replied. "Can't eat her."

Zao Ying gave a strange smile. "For men, a maid can be consumed too."

Zheng Daniu shook his head. "No, no, I don't eat human flesh."

Zao Ying confirmed it now—this guy truly didn't get the joke, and she found it fascinating. "Daniu, are you an Old Villager of Gaojia Village?"

Zheng Daniu chuckled. “Yeah, I arrived early; besides the first forty-two villagers of Gaojia Village, folks like those from Zhengjia Village, Zhuangjia Village, and Wangjia Village came next; back then, when Gaojia Village was building its gate, I pitched in too. I even cut wood for the carver to make statues, and I drove the public sun chariot, haha, that was years ago.”

Zao Ying asked. “No wonder you’re so rich; the Deity bestowed generous rewards then; you must still have more of these large ingots, which explains your spendthrift ways?”

Zheng Daniu responded. “More? Not really; I only had that one ingot left, and I just spent it—now I’m broke, hahaha.”

The others froze.

The five gunners he had treated immediately looked awkward; what the heck, Brother Daniu was poorer than them? They had more than that ingot’s worth—was the poorest person footing the bill?

Zao Ying was amazed. “Where’d your money go? What happened to it?”

Zheng Daniu patted his belly and grinned. “Eaten!”

The others stayed silent.

By then the shopkeeper had sliced a huge plate of lamb and thumped it down before them; Zheng Daniu didn’t use chopsticks—he just grabbed a piece of lamb with his hand and shoved it into his mouth. “Wow, tasty, tasty.”

“Stop eating like that; dip it in the seasoning!”

“Hey! The broth spilled on your clothes.”

Seeing him like that, Zao Ying couldn’t help but beam; he was one bold man.

She wasn't a delicate girl; she disliked meek, scholar-type men and simply admired Zheng Daniu's gutsy spirit; matching his hearty appetite, she also grabbed lamb with her hand and crammed it into her mouth. "Hahaha, eating big chunks of meat is such pleasure."

Zheng Daniu exclaimed. "Hahaha, Instructor Zao's a gutsy person too; come on, have more."

He held the lamb in his right hand but casually draped his left arm over Zao Ying's shoulder.

The other five gunners simultaneously swapped strange looks, thinking: Even though Instructor Zao looks like a gorilla (and it's hard to tell sex with gorillas), everyone knows she's female—what if she yells assault when you touch her like that?

But they needn't have worried; Zao Ying didn't care at all and just laughed out loud. "Daniu, you suit me well; here, down this bowl."

"Hey, we're on duty and can't drink alcohol; even though I'm stupid, I know that."

"It's not alcohol; it's tea."

"Much better."

They clinked bowls loudly and chugged a huge serving of tea, their mouths wide open as they tilted their heads back—a truly startling sight.

Zao Ying went on eating lamb and asked teasingly. "Hey, Daniu, if you've spent all your money, aren't you planning to marry?"

Zheng Daniu chuckled idly. "There's no girl I like, and no girl likes me."

Zao Ying retorted. "A fine man like you, and no woman wants you? Are all those women blind?"

The five gunners broke into a cold sweat, thinking: Instructor Zao, aren't you the blind one? Daniu's a fool, personally dubbed an "idiot" by the Deity, and he's spent all his money—who'd have him?

Chapter 373: You're Threatening This Official

Zheng Daniu indeed had self-awareness and said cheerfully, "I'm a fool; what girl would fall for a fool?"

Zao Ying replied, "A fool isn't cunning and doesn't lie through his teeth like clever people—what's wrong with that?"

Zheng Daniu chuckled cheerfully, gnawing on the lamb.

Zao Ying reached out and hooked her arm around his neck, pulling him closer until their heads were very near. She whispered softly, "I know a girl who doesn't hate fools. Want to talk to her and try things out? Maybe you two have a chance."

Zheng Daniu asked, "Ah? Instructor Zao actually knows a girl who likes fools?"

Zao Ying answered, "She's far yet near—just look before your eyes."

Zheng Daniu scanned around the room; there were only eight people besides himself: five grenadiers, Zao Ying, and the innkeeper. His eyes locked onto the innkeeper, and he cried out in shock, "Oh! Is the innkeeper a woman disguised as a man?"

"Hmph!"

The five grenadiers choked on their lamb at the same time and frantically thumped their chests.

Zao Ying groaned softly and toppled over with a thud.

The innkeeper, sweating profusely, hid far away and never dared to approach again.

Zheng Daniu pointed at the innkeeper who had “escaped” and said, “See, she doesn’t like fools; we can’t make a couple.”

Li Daoxuan, who had been secretly watching from outside the box, also covered his face with his hands in silent mourning.

...

At Qiachuan Port.

The Gaojia Village Militia and the cavalry camp had fought and then withdrawn immediately, lingering not at all.

But the Heyang County militia couldn’t leave in a rush; they still needed to clean up the battlefield, gather the corpses of the bandits left on the shore, strip them of their clothes, confiscate their weapons, and then dig a pit to bury the naked bodies.

Feng Jun also had to call back the escaped laborers, give them yellow hats, and have them continue building the cement fortress by the port.

This pile of tasks was exhausting to handle.

After finishing, they had to arrange for the militia to station themselves long-term at this port to prevent the bandits from secretly sending another fleet to land. Though everyone knew it was unlikely, they couldn’t take chances.

It was mentally draining!

Wang Er and the Wangjia Villagers didn’t immediately follow the militia and cavalry camp in withdrawing; they also helped at the port, assisting the Heyang County militia in burying the bandits’ corpses. They felt they had this responsibility.

Wang Er sighed regretfully and pointed to a corpse, saying to Bai Yuan, “That man just a few days ago was calling me brother and sharing life with me, yet here he fought bitterly today.”

Bai Yuan snapped open his fan, revealing the word “Gentleman,” about to say something, then suddenly sighed, snapped his fan shut with a clatter, and remained silent.

Wang Er watched as the Wangjia Villagers helped bury all the bandits’ corpses, then he waved his hand, gathered his people, and headed toward the northwest direction.

Bai Yuan shouted to his back, “Keep your men in line; on the way home, no burning, killing, or plundering.”

Wang Er raised his hand and said, “What kind of man do you think Wang Er is? If anyone burns, kills, or plunders, even if it’s my own blood brother, I’ll chop off his damned head.” After speaking, he strode off without looking back, and the Wangjia Villagers followed him away.

Bai Yuan stood quietly, not leaving; he knew Feng Jun must have a lot to say to him.

Sure enough, not long after, Feng Jun sneaked over to his side.

“Mr. Bai, the combat power of the Gaojia Village Militia really took this official a bit by surprise,” Feng Jun said with a strange tone. “So many firearms, so much armor, cannons and weird bombs—what exactly are you all up to?”

Bai Yuan grinned mischievously and snapped open his fan. “We’re just defending ourselves, of course.”

Feng Jun replied, “But such self-defense... isn’t it a bit... a bit excessive?”

Bai Yuan spread his hands and said, “Lord Feng, in your view, if we don’t arm ourselves like this and Wang Jiayin really leads fifty thousand troops to attack, what should we do? Can conventional militia gear genuinely hold off fifty thousand bandits?”

Feng Jun's expression turned solemn. "It can't hold! But... we can't resist using nearly rebellious means either."

Bai Yuan patted his shoulder gently and spoke earnestly. "Lord Feng, if we can't resist Wang Jiayin, are you planning to martyr yourself for your country?"

"Exactly!" Feng Jun's face bore a trace of determination, and this time he surprisingly didn't have a nosebleed. Clearly, his emotions were not excited at all—completely flat, as if stating the obvious. "Martyrdom for my country; this official wouldn't hesitate in the slightest."

Bai Yuan chuckled a couple of times. "Lord Feng is a fine, patriotic official who loves his people. But what you can do doesn't mean others can. There are always some people who don't want to die pointlessly—like myself, for example. The villagers of Gaojia Village don't want to either. We don't want to die, so of course, we resist. And if conventional resistance isn't enough, we won't shy from using some unconventional methods."

Feng Jun's expression turned severe. "That's rebellion and warrants execute along with their families."

Bai Yuan retorted, "Well, if the bandits come, they'll massacre us anyway, and if the court also executes our families, we'll have to treat the court and the bandits as birds of a feather."

Upon hearing this, Feng Jun was immensely startled.

This was truly a great traitor-like statement; to hear it from a refined gentleman like Bai Yuan was utterly terrifying.

Bai Yuan shifted gears. "If the court doesn't see us as rebels and doesn't execute our families, then we'll still be lawful, decent citizens."

Feng Jun understood—Bai Yuan meant that if this official reported Gaojia Village's activities to the court, Gaojia Village would rebel. But if he didn't report it, they'd remain good citizens. Whether Gaojia Village rebelled or not now depended entirely on Feng Jun's stance.

Wow, what a shocking remark.

His eyes narrowed slightly. “Mr. Bai, you’re threatening this official.”

Bai Yuan laughed heartily and snapped his fan shut with a clatter. “In such turbulent times, if we don’t want to throw our lives away needlessly, even a gentleman must resort to extreme measures. Lord Feng, you decide.”

After speaking, he turned around. A family servant behind him led over a fine horse. Bai Yuan mounted it elegantly, his white robes billowing—dashing beyond words. Pressing his legs against the horse’s flanks, the warhorse dashed off instantly, vanishing in the distance in a flash.

The Bai family servants shouted and hurried close behind.

Feng Jun watched their receding figures for a long time without uttering a word.

Some time later, his trusted family servant sidled up beside him and whispered, “Master, your nosebleed...”

Feng Jun wiped; the nosebleed was gone clean, leaving no trace on his face.

The servant whispered softly, “He was too arrogant just now; we should have ordered to detain him. Capture the rebel leader, and the other ruffians won’t dare act up.”

Feng Jun shook his head. “Haven’t you realized? The real rebel leader in Gaojia Village isn’t him. That Madam Li, Thirty-Two, Instructor Zao, Instructor He—each is a leader. Who’s the worst? Detaining Bai Yuan would only force Gaojia Village into rebellion. Sigh, what should this official do about Gaojia Village?”

Chapter 374: Its Good That Youre Back

When Feng Jun finished cleaning the battlefield, arranged the laborers, and returned once again to Heyang County Town, another day had already passed.

As he reentered the town, he discovered that the county town was filled with an unusual sweet fragrance, which seemed to be the smell of Egg Cake.

Every commoner was filled with joy.

Every shop owner by the street and every small eatery proprietor had a face full of smiles, as if celebrating a festival.

He was feeling annoyed, and seeing the commoners so joyful, he couldn't help but feel surprised; this atmosphere made him feel out of place, and he casually grabbed a passing vendor: "Why is it so fragrant in the city?"

The vendor was startled and quickly bowed: "County Lord, during these past two days when you were at Qiachuan Port suppressing bandits, the county town suddenly rained Egg Cakes; Egg Cakes fell all over the city; according to Daoist Ma, this was food bestowed upon us by the Dao Xuan Deity, and we even had a 'Deity Egg Cake Festival' for a day, so that's why the city is filled with this sweet fragrance."

Feng Jun: "Huh? Rain of Egg Cakes?"

He had thought the vendor was crazy from overeating, but unexpectedly, an attendant from the county office nearby leaned over and cheerfully said: "I picked up two catties of Egg Cakes and went home; hey, I could eat for several days."

Feng Jun was a bit dumbfounded: "So everyone on the street is laughing because of these Egg Cakes?"

"That's not it." The vendor said a little happily: "It's because everyone made a profit."

Feng Jun: "???"

The vendor said: "Yesterday, the people of Gaojia Village Militia returned victoriously, passed by our county town, and stayed here for two hours; they were very wealthy; every soldier had a lot of money; once they hit the streets, they shopped and shopped; the goods I had prepared yesterday were sold out instantly; everyone doing business on this street made a lot; yesterday was the best business day for us in several years."

Feng Jun's eyes narrowed slightly: "Bought? No looting?"

The vendor laughed: "Those soldiers looked fierce, but in reality, they were very disciplined; each one spoke courteously; they never relied on violence to get their way."

Feng Jun felt a complex sentiment inside and didn't know how to express it for the moment.

Was the Gaojia Village Militia more disciplined than the marauders and officials?

Needless to say about the marauders who were rotten, on the officials' side, even the most disciplined elite troops couldn't avoid some instances of demanding bribes or refusing to pay for things; not to mention the likes of Wu Zimian and Li Ying, those worthless martial ruffians.

Unexpectedly, the Gaojia Village Militia had achieved complete non-harming.

It really was a bit surprising to him.

Since his conversation with Bai Yuan yesterday, he had been hesitating whether to write a memorial detailing matters about the Gaojia Village Militia and submit it; now, after hearing the vendor and attendant's words, he had temporarily decided clearly—don't write the memorial for now.

However, not writing the memorial, there was one thing he had to do.

Feng Jun returned to the county office, removed his official garments, changed into plain clothes, dressing himself like a merchant; then he led a team of trusted servants, exited the county town, spurred on his horse, and galloped toward Chengcheng County Town.

He had to go see Liang Shixian!

... ..

Bai Shui Wang Er, bringing one hundred Wangjia Villagers, finally returned to his hometown.

Seeing the water pool outside Gaojia Fortress, at least half of the one hundred villagers behind him burst into tears: "The bond with Gaojia Village started from this water pool; Big Brother Wang Er brought us to Gaojia Village back then to steal water... and we were given flour..."

Thirty-Two came out to welcome them with a smile, accompanied by Gaojia Village's management team; behind them were large groups of villagers from Zhuangjia Village, Zhengjia Village, and Wangjia Village; most of them were part of the first batch of labor offenders.

Both sides held hands, looked at each other with tears, and were choked up without words.

"Everyone has returned! It's good that you're back." Thirty-Two smiled: "Brother Wang, Wangjia Village's farmland has now received rain, and it has even been sown with seeds; you and your people only need to go through some formalities to get the farmland back, and you'll soon be able to settle down and build lives."

Wang Er looked back a bit awkwardly at the hundred Wangjia Villagers behind him, who after years of wandering and fighting officials everywhere, had long...

He shook his head, sighed: "Forget about the farmland; after so many years, others must be farming it; if we come back now, we'd just argue over ownership; that's not good; let them join the militia! These people can't farm anymore; they might be good at fighting, at least they won't even blink when arrows fly."

There was some truth to these words.

Thirty-Two smiled: "Fine!"

Wang Er said again: "I bear the title of the number one rebel in the empire; if I keep showing my face, it might bring trouble to Gaojia Village; I plan to change my name to Old Tiger Wang; what do you think of this name?"

Thirty-Two: “Pfft!”

Wang Er: “???”

Thirty-Two shook his head: “Your naming skills; the Deity has complained many times; can’t you come up with more creative names?”

Wang Er: “Isn’t this name pretty good? What is a Deity?”

Thirty-Two spread his hands: “If you stay here for a while, you’ll know; back then, the one who gave you flour was the Deity; the venerable one has been watching you all along.”

Wang Er was startled inside; he looked up but saw nothing.

“People do, heaven watches; the Deity has always been watching.” Thirty-Two said to Brother Wang: “What you did lives up to the conscience between heaven and earth; the Deity has seen it all; that’s why Gaojia Village has always kept a place for you.”

Although Wang Er didn’t know who the Deity was, he felt the meaning in Thirty-Two’s words, saluted the sky: “Wang Er is honored to be regarded highly by the Deity.”

Thirty-Two: “Brother Wang, first take your people to the barracks; look, that’s the barracks over there; Instructor He has been waiting for a long time; he will arrange for them to find their place in the barracks.”

Wang Er: “I saw Instructor He’s skills at Qiachuan Port; truly impressive; this time I go, I will be sure to learn well from him.”

He led the Wangjia Villagers, striding toward the barracks; at the barracks entrance, Cheng Xu had already been waiting for a long time; seeing the cloth mask on Wang Er’s face, Cheng Xu pointed to the cloth mask on his own face, then laughed heartily.

Wang Er instantly understood: “You too?”

Cheng Xu: “I am too!”

The two clasped fists in salute, everything unsaid between them.

On the other side...

Feng Jun, with a group of servants, discreetly arrived in Chengcheng County; he had originally planned to visit Liang Shixian directly, but unexpectedly, upon reaching the county office, he heard from the gatekeeper that the County Lord had gone to the City God Temple.

Feng Jun then led his servants and searched his way to the City God Temple.

When they were still a street away from the temple, they could see from afar a huge statue towering in the temple; the statue was taller than all the buildings in the temple; its upper half emerged over the sea of low structures, coated with a layer of gold powder, gleaming under the sunlight, dignified and solemn.

Chapter 375: The Three-Year Term Has Expired

Feng Jun was startled when he saw the golden statue in the distance: Had he made a mistake? He had been to Chengcheng County before, but there had never been such a large statue. Was this just built?

He quickly stopped a pedestrian: “When did such a statue appear in your Chengcheng County?”

At that time, he wasn’t wearing his official garments; he was dressed plainly like a merchant. The pedestrian, upon hearing this, rolled his eyes and scrutinized him like a country bumpkin: “That’s the Dao Xuan Deity Statue, funded by all the wealthy people in our county. It was just completed a couple of days ago.”

Feng Jun felt a slight stir inwardly. He had heard the name Dao Xuan Deity before. When Daoist Ma, Ma Tianyuan, prayed for rain, hadn’t he claimed to seek it from this Deity? He also said the Four Sea Dragon Kings were caught by the neck by the Deity.

The pedestrian spoke with a hint of pride: "Isn't this Deity statue amazing? People from all walks of life here mobilized over a thousand workers and took nearly two years to finish it."

Feng Jun uttered an "Eh?"—over a thousand people working for nearly two years? Was this absurd? This was a year of great disaster; how could they engage in such activities? Weren't they afraid of starving? No, hold on! The Chengcheng County he passed through on his journey seemed unscathed by disaster.

He asked in a low voice: "Did Dao Xuan Deity bring rain to Chengcheng County? So that's why you built this statue?"

The pedestrian laughed: "Not just rain. The Deity personally intervened to help us defeat the rebel band in Guyuan."

"Personally intervened?" Feng Jun was startled again: "How did he do that?"

The pedestrian rolled up his sleeves, mimed a palm strike descending from the sky, and added a sound effect: "Traitors, won't you die?"

"Look, just like this: he slapped down from the clouds; the Deity's hand was tens of meters wide, booming like earth and mountains shaking. The Guyuan rebels were so scared they wet their pants, hahaha."

After hearing this, Feng Jun silently labeled the pedestrian as "crazy" in his mind, clasped his fists, and said: "Thank you for your guidance, brother."

After saying that, he quickly made himself scarce.

A servant approached and whispered: "Master, could what that man said be true?"

Feng Jun replied: "That man is mad. Let's just go ask Liang Shixian directly."

With the huge golden statue serving as their guide, they didn't need to ask for directions. Walking briskly toward it, they soon reached the City God Temple.

At the temple entrance, a plaque still hung reading "City God Temple"; it hadn't been changed to "Dao Xuan Deity Cave." This was due to Li Daoxuan's decree forbidding his followers to alter it. In his eyes, the City God Temple was a landmark-level building in Chengcheng County, a historical relic, and in the future, it would even be a tourist spot. Changing its name for a joke would mar its beauty.

The layout inside the City God hall remained unchanged; the main hall still enshrined the City God. Li Daoxuan's massive golden statue stood in a newly opened area behind the temple.

Feng Jun walked for a long while before reaching the foot of the statue.

He immediately spotted Liang Shixian standing there, holding an incense stick with both hands and respectfully offering it to the Dao Xuan Deity statue.

Feng Jun was startled inwardly: Is Magistrate Liang involved in this too?

He saw Liang Shixian finish the incense offering, then personally pick up a drumstick and strike a large bell nearby. With a loud "gong," the sound resonated melodiously, soaring into the sky.

At that moment, Li Daoxuan was eating Chunhua Hele. Just minutes earlier, the Hele from Chunhua he bought on an online shopping site had arrived, so he quickly prepared a bowl. Holding it, he ate while sighing a little regretfully that it wasn't the Fresh Water Hele from Heyang County.

Seeing "Chengcheng County" flashing on the box, he casually pressed a button and jumped over. He saw Liang Shixian just having finished offering incense, whispering something toward his own huge golden statue.

Liang Shixian's voice was soft, but with the "Attention" function turned on, Li Daoxuan heard every word clearly.

“I report to the Deity. Your humble official has completed three years as magistrate of Chengcheng County and must return to the capital to report on duty before being transferred elsewhere.”

Liang Shixian’s tone was desolate: “Your humble official received much care from the Deity during these three years in Chengcheng County: grain and money to aid the people. Now I must leave. The world is vast, and I don’t know where I’ll go. Without the Deity’s help, I don’t know if I can remain a good official, sigh...”

Upon hearing this, Li Daoxuan suddenly realized.

Liang Shixian had come to Chengcheng County as magistrate at the end of Year Seven of Tianqi, bringing news of Emperor Tianqi’s death with his appointment. In the blink of an eye, three years had flown by. Ming Dynasty local officials served three-year terms; his term had ended, so he had to return to the capital to report and be transferred.

For Chengcheng County, this was a major upheaval. No wonder he risked “disturbing the Deity’s tranquility” to ring the bell.

Liang Shixian murmured: “After your humble official is transferred, I don’t know if the successor will be upright or corrupt. If upright, it would be best. But if a corrupt official comes, I can only beg the Deity, Elder, to use divine powers to punish the corrupt official and protect the common people.”

His tone, like a posthumous request, was pitiful.

Li Daoxuan frowned as he listened, also pondering: Overall, Liang Shixian was good. If replaced by a corrupt official, I would have to kill him. But the death of a magistrate would alarm the court, leading to chaos and trouble.

Just then, Feng Jun approached. Standing behind Liang Shixian, he greeted with a grin: “Brother Liang, what are you muttering at the statue?”

Liang Shixian’s whispers were so soft that only he and Li Daoxuan could hear them; he didn’t intend to share them. Thus, Feng Jun heard nothing and assumed Liang was making a wish to the deity statue.

The greeting started Liang Shixian slightly. Turning, he recognized his junior, Feng Jun.

Feng Jun was several years younger than Liang Shixian and considered Liang's junior at Donglin Academy.

Both had been students at Donglin Academy, making them classmates. In the Ming Dynasty bureaucracy, such bonds were strong, as factions often formed around teacher-disciple or classmate ties.

Liang Shixian was surprised: "Eh? Brother Feng, what brings you here?"

Feng Jun said: "There are some urgent matters I need to discuss with Brother Liang."

Seeing Feng Jun in plain clothes with a serious look, Liang knew it was important and whispered: "Brother Feng, come with me. Let's find a quiet spot."

Now, Li Daoxuan also saw Feng Jun and thought secretly: The magistrate of Heyang County, in plain clothes, came to Chengcheng County. Interesting! You could almost be charged with dereliction of duty.

It seemed he really had something important to exaggerate about.

Chapter 376: I Have a Way to Keep You from Getting Transferred

Liang Shixian led Feng Jun away. Beside the golden giant statue of the Deity was a secluded path flanked by woods. Following the curved flagstone trail through the forest, the two men unexpectedly circled around to the back of the Deity's colossal statue.

Here lay a small pond teeming with swarms of tadpoles swimming. By the pond stood a small stone table with four small stone stools.

The two men sat down here.

The servants dispersed far away, guarding the perimeter.

Liang Shixian glanced around and said, "We needn't worry about eavesdroppers here. With the Golden Statue of the Deity beside us, no one dares anything untoward. Brother Feng, whatever you wish to say, speak freely."

Feng Jun glanced at the Deity's statue, whose back was like a small mountain, and couldn't help feeling awestruck. Collecting himself, he whispered, "Brother Liang, we both attended lectures at the Donglin Academy. I trust your character, which is why I dare ask something so bold. If I cause offense in any way, I beg your indulgence..."

Liang Shixian: "What exactly is it?"

Feng Jun: "A few days ago, Bai Yuzhu, a senior general under Wang Jiayin, led over ten thousand roaming bandits to attack Qiachuan Port in my Heyang County. I was utterly overwhelmed. Then, the lord of Bai Family Fortress from your county, Bai Yuan, brought his militia to my aid..."

Liang Shixian: "I know of this Bai Yuan. A refined gentleman, proficient in both culture and martial skills. I entrusted all of Chengcheng County's militia to him. What happened at Qiachuan Port?"

Feng Jun: "He somehow deployed five hundred firearm soldiers, three hundred cavalry troops, and several hundred soldiers throwing strange bombs. Moreover, every single one wore armor. It practically amounted to rebellion."

Listening here, Li Daoxuan briefly smiled, his lips curling upward faintly: So that's what you came to discuss. Well, I knew the Gaojia Village Militia would attract official attention sooner or later. Let's see how this develops.

Liang Shixian: "Hmm?"

Seeing his odd expression, clearly unaware, Feng Jun echoed, "Hmm? Brother Liang didn't know?"

Liang Shixian shook his head: "I knew about some armor, and I knew about a few firearms, but five hundred firearms and over a thousand sets of armor? This is the first I've heard of it."

At this point, Liang Shixian suddenly thought of something and asked quickly, "Were these men from Gaojia Village?"

Feng Jun: "Yes! They called themselves the Gaojia Village Militia!"

Liang Shixian vaguely understood something: "The Li Family... funded by the Li Family... No, not the Li Family... funded by the Deity."

He pointed to the giant statue beside them: "They are the Deity's troops."

"Huh?" Feng Jun was stunned: "What? The Deity's troops? Isn't the Deity a god? How can he possibly have troops?"

Liang Shixian: "Although the Deity is a god, he is one who actively manifests his presence. He directly intervenes to reward the good and punish the wicked. He frequently bestows grain and various divine artifacts upon mortals..."

Feng Jun jolted as he remembered something. Once, traveling via Gaojia Village on his way to Xi'an to deliver Fan Shanyue's head, he had ridden on that peculiar little train. Could that be one of the so-called divine artifacts?

"The Deity... is truly divine?"

"Nonsense!" Liang Shixian said, "Is he a real god or a fake one? Think about it yourself. Besides a god, who could enable that small, ordinary Gaojia Village to produce five hundred firearms and over a thousand sets of armor?"

Feng Jun thought carefully. Wasn't that true?

How much wealth could a single village possibly possess?

Forget five hundred firearms – even five wouldn't be feasible.

Feng Jun felt himself half-convinced. He had witnessed the Deity “invite” the Four Sea Dragon Kings to bring rain. Accepting that was relatively easy. But accepting the existence of the Deity was one thing; accepting those five hundred firearms and over a thousand sets of armor was quite another matter.

Feng Jun whispered, “Brother Liang, although these things belong to a deity, possessing so much fundamentally alters their purpose! That Li Family in Gaojia Village, armed with firearms and armor, is more formidable than that bandit chief Wang Jiayin. Doesn’t that give them the means to rebel and cause chaos? What if they follow the bandits’ example and start a rebellion? What then?”

Liang Shixian: “Rebellion? That... Brother Feng, you’re overthinking this. How could a god rebel against mortals? A lofty deity, rebelling to become Emperor? Though we call him ‘Emperor,’ he is also called the ‘Son of Heaven.’ If a god became the ‘Son of Heaven,’ wouldn’t that demote him to the status of a son?”

Feng Jun: “... ”

This reasoning did seem plausible.

Feng Jun was somewhat bewildered.

Frowning in thought for a moment, Feng Jun lowered his voice again: “Brother Liang, while a god may not vie for the throne, once these divine artifacts fall into mortal hands, who can guarantee the mortals won’t harbor treacherous ambitions? What if, among these mortals in Gaojia Village—Bai Yuan, Instructor He, Instructor Zao—just one develops treacherous intentions? What if he attempts to use these god-given weapons to launch a rebellion? What should we do then?”

Liang Shixian: “Men do things; Heaven watches them. Raise your head three feet, and there is a god. Since these are bestowed by the Deity, naturally the Deity oversees them. If a mortal harbors treacherous thoughts, the Deity will inevitably mete out punishment.”

Feng Jun: “That’s hard to say! Even immortals take naps. Lord Lao Tzu’s Azure Buffalo once escaped to the mortal realm to wreak havoc.”

Liang Shixian: “Hmm?”

This reasoning also made sense!

Indeed, not only Liang Shixian found it reasonable, but even Li Daoxuan found it so.

As his field of vision expanded wider and wider, he truly found it impossible to manage so many villages and towns. Even the three major areas—Gaojia Village, Chengcheng County Town, and Heyang County Town—wore him constantly shifting his focus. As for places like Fengyuan Town, Bai Family Fortress, or Quangou Village, how long had it been since he last observed them?

Adding to this, just recently, he had been contemplating needing someone to help him “enforce order”. Feng Jun bringing this up now did make him pay greater attention.

Feng Jun: “We cannot control the Deity, but we absolutely must govern these mortals under his command. Master Liang, Gaojia Village is under the jurisdiction of your Chengcheng County. I cannot overstep boundaries to handle this; it relies entirely on you to think of a solution.”

Liang Shixian revealed an awkward smile: “Brother Feng, this matter... I’m afraid I cannot manage it anymore.”

Feng Jun: “Why not?”

Liang Shixian let out a long sigh: “My term of office has reached its three-year end.”

“Ah?” Feng Jun understood: “It’s been three years already for you, Brother Liang... Alas, only a bit over a year for me...”

Liang Shixian: “My burning incense and striking the bell earlier was my way of reporting this to the Dao Xuan Deity. I shall shortly depart to travel to the capital. After submitting my official report, I will await reassignment.”

Seeing the pain and regret on Liang Shixian’s face told Feng Jun he was reluctant to leave. Feng Jun’s eyes darted, and he whispered, “Brother Liang, I have a way to ensure you aren’t transferred.”

Liang Shixian was greatly astonished: “Hmm? How is that possible? An official’s term is three years; it is mandatory to be reassigned upon completion. How could there possibly be a way to avoid it?”

Chapter 377: Gaojia Village Discipline Committee

Feng Jun smiled and said, “With your abilities, brother, how could you not know that a county magistrate can be reappointed? It’s just that when it concerns yourself, it’s hard to think calmly. Take a deep breath and ponder carefully again. Back when we were drinking and chatting at Donglin Academy, someone did mention... the magistrate with the longest tenure in our Great Ming...”

Hearing this, Liang Shixian was momentarily startled: had such a thing truly happened?

He needed to think hard!

Liang Shixian, knowledgeable in many matters, instantly activated his memory recall mode. Past chats with friends, strange tales he had heard, and notable figures all spun in his mind like a revolving lantern. Then, with a “ding,” it settled on one name.

Bai Zheng, styled Siqi, born in Fengrun County, Shuntian Office, became the magistrate of Huarong County in the 12th year of the Yongle era. He understood the people’s sentiments well, served honestly and selflessly, consulted county residents on major issues before acting, and won deep respect. After 12 years as magistrate of Huarong County, he was promoted to deputy magistrate of Cizhou. The county people didn’t want him to leave, so they sent representatives to the capital to plea for his retention. The Ministry of Personnel then reassigned him as deputy magistrate of Wuchang Prefecture in Huguang Circuit, while he continued as magistrate of Huarong County for another 10 years.

In total, he served for 21 years, making him the magistrate with the longest term in Ming Dynasty history.

At this thought, Liang Shixian’s eyes involuntarily brightened: “Right, there’s this method! If I ask some village elders and county residents to jointly draft a petition, pleading on behalf of the people, to request the court to retain me for reappointment, maybe I could linger in the post of Chengcheng County Magistrate for a few more years. Yet... I wonder if the local village elders and county residents would be willing to write this petition for me, sigh.”

He wasn’t very confident in himself.

Feng Jun whispered, "Brother Liang, you've governed Chengcheng County so excellently, with the common folk living in peace and contentment. I see they all respect you. Writing such a petition shouldn't be hard. And we can seek help from some old friends at Donglin Academy to put in effort together. This might not even need to reach the emperor; it could get resolved just within the Ministry of Personnel."

Liang Shixian felt a slight awkwardness: "But it's only a minor matter of reappointment. To trouble my friends at Donglin Academy—isn't that improper?"

"A minor matter? This is far from minor." Feng Jun murmured low, "Brother Liang, you're simply too upright and honest. The transfer of officials—isn't that an enormous affair? How could it be small? Forget wanting to stay put; even if you hoped to climb a level or two, the senior friends above would happily assist."

Liang Shixian grasped it now: wasn't this the so-called forming cliques? Back in the day, the Eunuch Party had done the same, and now... He couldn't help hissing.

Seeing his apparent disdain, Feng Jun secretly thought: Brother Liang is more upright than me! He doesn't want to operate through connections.

But he couldn't afford to lose Brother Liang here. With him in Chengcheng, he, the Heyang County Magistrate, felt secure. If Liang left, his own position as Heyang County Magistrate would be shaky, always fearing Gaojia Village might rebel and invade Heyang County. How could he risk his life against Gaojia Village's terrifying firearm troops?

With this thought, Feng Jun had to take charge: "Brother Liang, here's the plan: delay your return to the capital to report duty. Hand this over to me. I'll draft a letter immediately and arrange your reappointment for you."

Liang Shixian truly didn't wish to use such connections, yet he wanted to remain Chengcheng County Magistrate. For a moment, he was torn between upholding his principles or choosing the life path he desired. After much internal debate, he finally heaved a long sigh: "Then, I leave it to you, Brother Feng."

Li Daoxuan, watching this, also sighed softly: If Liang Shixian could be reappointed, it would be splendid, but to rely on Donglin Party backing and clique-forming felt truly strange.

In the jianghu, a person has little choice.

At the same time, a man dragged a cart and had just entered Gaojia Village.

Had Gao Yiye been there, she would have recognized him as the owner of that “Fresh Water Hele shop” in Heyang County.

On the cart he pulled were all his essential business tools: a large pot, a big colander, long chopsticks, porcelain bowls, and a heap of other items.

The boss had finally resolved to come to Gaojia Village to try his luck at business.

After Gao Yiye gave him that suggestion, and the Gaojia Village Militia spent a hefty sum at his place, Gao Yiye and the militia soon departed, and Heyang County returned to its usual quiet.

After all, Heyang County’s economy took time to recover. His shop turned sluggish again; he earned few coins all day, making him anxious. So, gritting his teeth, he came to Gaojia Village.

He was truly exhausted after dragging the cart for several dozen li.

The boss sat panting at the village entrance. Gaojia Village before him unnerved him: smooth cement roads were everywhere; around the grand and lofty fortress stood colorful “Deity-colored” houses alongside newly built cement structures.

Its immense scale even dwarfed a town; it was evolving towards a “prefectural city” or “provincial capital.”

The boss felt like a country bumpkin in the city, finding everything novel.

His heart fluttered: Could he establish a foothold here?

As he wavered in doubt, a group of young men approached, armbands reading "Discipline Committee" on their sleeves.

The boss didn't understand "Discipline Committee," but seeing such figures, he knew they weren't to be crossed. He managed a smile and tried to slip away.

But it was too late to avoid; the Discipline Committee was heading straight for him.

A middle-aged man at the front grinned at the boss and pointed at his cart: "You're an outsider? Here to make a living in our Gaojia Village?"

The boss nodded hastily: "Yes, I wonder... you... what is it?"

The middle-aged man chuckled: "I'm Zhang Laowu, head of Gaojia Village's 'Discipline Committee.' Cough, actually Thirty-Two originally named us 'Village Management Brigade,' but for some reason, the Deity disliked 'village management' and decreed we be renamed 'Discipline Committee,' abbreviated to 'Discipline Committee.'"

The boss still didn't know what this group was. He forced a smile: "Hello, chairman..."

Zhang Laowu said, "What's your name? Where are you from? What do you plan to do in Gaojia Village? Just register briefly. After that, you can receive minimum livelihood aid and food. But aid only fills your belly; it won't make you rich, so you still need to work to prosper."

The boss quickly introduced himself: "I'm Liu You, from Heyang County. I aim to run a business here, opening a snack shop selling Fresh Water Hele."

Zhang Laowu: "Huh? What's Fresh Water Hele? Never tried it."

Liu You hastily gave a detailed description of his snack.

After the introduction, he looked up: the entire “Discipline Committee” team was drooling. “Wow, Mr. Liu You, why wait? Hurry and open your shop! Quick, quick, we’ll lead you to Gaojia Business Circle to find a storefront and open immediately.”

Chapter 378: Whats the Difference from Giving It Away for Free

Liu You was led by a group of the Discipline Committee members, rushing towards the Gaojia Business Circle, and several people helped him push the cart.

Originally, Liu You was already tired and sleepy, barely able to pull the cart; with this group helping to push, he felt much lighter, and in no time, they rushed into the Gaojia Business Circle.

Multicolored plastic houses combined with colorful lights made the entire Gaojia Business Circle appear prosperous and bustling, far surpassing the commercial streets in Heyang County; it made Liu You exclaim “Wow wow wow” repeatedly, fully showing the feeling of a country person entering a grand garden.

The shops here offered a dazzling array of goods; everything seemed to be for sale, the variety extremely abundant; it made Liu You feel dizzy looking around, yet he dared not ask the prices.

Someone shouted, “Leader Zhang, where is there an empty shop?”

Zhang Laowu thought for a while, “The shops in good locations have all been claimed; it isn’t easy to find a good spot now.”

A member of the Discipline Committee said, “What about the brothel? That brothel has been vacant all along.”

Zhang Laowu replied, “The brothel’s position is truly excellent! It’s in the best spot right at the center of the business circle; leaving it empty forever isn’t sensible; why not use it to open a small eatery?”

Upon hearing this, Liu You was instantly puzzled, “Huh? What? What what what?”

Zhang Laowu asked, "Because the Deity doesn't allow this kind of trade, the brothel isn't usable; you don't mind opening your Fresh Water Hele shop inside the brothel, do you?"

Liu You sweated profusely, "I mind, very much."

Zhang Laowu offered, "No rent, free to use."

Liu You responded, "I don't mind at all; what's that? Just change the signboard and it's usable, right?"

The crowd fell silent...

So the matter was decided. Zhang Laowu took Liu You around half of the Gaojia Business Circle and arrived in front of the brothel, which was a rather large building; the first floor had very spacious space to place many tables, and besides, it wasn't just one floor; the second floor had many small rooms too.

With so much space, no rent to pay, and for his own use, Liu You felt delighted; in the future, he planned to place square tables everywhere on the first floor; as for the second floor... he could use it as his temporary residence for now, and the extra rooms could serve as a warehouse.

The only issue was that the signboard wasn't appealing—a plaque with the three characters "Yihong House" hung above the entrance, feeling a bit strange; next to it was a couplet: the upper scroll read "Business thriving with bed boards creaking," the lower scroll read "Fortune wide with belts loosening," which made Liu You's scalp tingle.

He wanted to tear them down but couldn't.

He realized this couplet was also part of the house, directly molded onto the plastic houses; it wasn't stuck on at all.

However, Zhang Laowu had a way; he ran to a paper shop and obtained a blank couplet; he covered it over the brothel's entrance couplet and pasted it with glue; this way, much of the brothel's vibe couldn't be seen anymore.

“A blank couplet really looks strange,” a member of the Discipline Committee whispered, “Should we write something on it?”

Liu You shook his head, “I only know a few simple words; I can’t write myself.”

The Discipline Committee members all shook their heads, “Oh no, none of us can write properly.”

Liu You suggested, “How about just drawing something random on it?”

Zhang Laowu suddenly chuckled, “I’ll go find someone to help.”

Liu You was greatly surprised, “People who can read and write are all proud; who would come write for a small vendor like me? If I had to pay money for it, I don’t have enough anyway.”

Zhang Laowu chuckled again, “Just wait; it won’t cost anything.”

He dashed away, vanishing in an instant.

Everyone waited quietly for a moment until Zhang Laowu rushed back, followed by a man dressed as a scholar—he was Dian Deng Zi Zhao Sheng.

This scholar had previously lived in Qingjian County and loved helping the villagers write family letters or couplets; he never charged a fee, so he was cherished by the locals there, which led them to make him their leader for rebellion and uprising.

Zhao Sheng panted heavily, “Zhang Laowu, you guys... want... (pant) to write... what... kind of... thing?”

Liu You was startled to see Zhao Sheng gasping desperately, barely able to catch his breath. “Surely this gentleman won’t suffocate?” he worried.

Fortunately, after wheezing for a while, Zhao Sheng gradually calmed down, his speech returning to a normal pace: “What do you want written? Tell me about it?”

Liu You quickly described the delicacy Fresh Water Hele in detail. Upon hearing this, ideas instantly flooded Zhao Sheng’s mind. He picked up his brush and swept bold characters across the blank couplet paper.

First Line: “A Thousand Strands of Hele Increase Fortune and Longevity”.

Second Line: “A Bowl of Fragrant Broth Warms the Dreaming Soul”.

Horizontal Scroll: “Fresh Water Hele”.

Liu You was overjoyed: “Sir, you possess great talent! Though I’m an illiterate, even I can feel the festive joy in these phrases.”

Zhao Sheng laughed heartily: “In my youth, I aspired to attain a scholar-official rank, having read countless books. How could one lack some flair?”

Hearing Zhao Sheng say “in my youth,” Liu You found it rather odd: “Sir, you don’t seem old. You could still take the exams. Why do you speak of it as a past ambition with no present intention?”

Zhao Sheng roared with laughter: “Even if I passed and became an official, who knows where I’d be posted? Could it possibly be as joyful as life here in Gaojia Village?”

Liu You thought to himself: Living here is more comfortable than being an official? I don’t believe it!

But upon second thought, he reconsidered: The people of Gaojia Village are truly good. Even though it’s my shop opening, they’re so enthusiastically helping. A large group of them, locals, bustling around me, an outsider – such warmth can’t be found elsewhere.

Just as this thought crossed his mind, he saw the entire group who had helped him moments ago walk straight into his shop. They dragged a plastic table over, sat down around it, and stared at him with wide, expectant eyes.

Liu You: “???”

Zhao Sheng: “Hurry and open your shop! We’re all waiting for Fresh Water Hele.”

Liu You looked awkward: “It’s still much too early! I still need to set up the stove, buy ingredients for the Fresh Water Hele... I haven’t even decided on the selling price for a bowl yet.”

Zhao Sheng: “Then what are we chatting for? Get moving!”

Liu You realized this bunch was absolutely determined to eat his Fresh Water Hele. If they didn’t get it today, they weren’t leaving.

Alright, get things ready quickly.

He unloaded his various cooking tools from his small cart. Using a few stones, he hastily assembled a temporary stove. He had coal he’d brought from Heyang County on the cart – he quickly stuffed some into the stove to get the fire going.

Next came the most crucial ingredient: the flour.

Zhao Sheng pointed: “Right at the corner of this street, there’s the ‘Gaojia Village Village-Run Granary.’ Go buy flour there; it’s very cheap.”

Liu You hurried over, feeling somewhat apprehensive. Grain prices were anything but low during this great disaster year; he had no idea how much they charged here in Gaojia Village.

He cautiously inquired: “Do you have buckwheat flour?”

The shop assistant beamed: "Indeed we do!"

Liu You: "How much per half-kilogram?"

The shop assistant: "Seven coppers."

"Hiss—!" Liu You gasped in shock: "So cheap? How is this any different from giving it away for free?"

Chapter 379: I Made a Fortune!

The shop assistant laughed. "It's very different from giving it away for free. In our Gaojia Village, if you work as a road construction laborer with no skills at all, it's pure physical effort, and you only earn three jin of flour a day. But here, one jin of flour is worth just seven coins. Do the math yourself—isn't that giving it away?"

Liu You calculated quickly and got a jolt. That meant, money earned from a whole day's work was only twenty-one coins? Working for a whole month earned only six hundred coins, which was six qian of silver.

This showed... doing dumb physical labor here earned hardly any money at all!

Next, he thought about Heyang County's current situation. After Heyang County got help from Gaojia Village, road construction workers earned wages that covered their food, plus three jin of flour daily as pay.

But before, he had used Heyang County's grain price for his calculations, so he thought the road construction wages were very high. Using Gaojia Village's grain price, though, they were shockingly low.

Liu You couldn't help but ask more. "What job here earns the most money?"

The shop assistant smiled. "Becoming a craftsman! A skilled craftsman can't avoid earning monthly wages of three taels of silver."

Liu You was startled. "Three taels!"

This truly shocked him.

The shop assistant rocked back on his heels with a laugh. "Here, having a skill means you can strike it rich."

Liu You thought to himself: I have the skill for making Fresh Water Hele, so that should count as a skill, right? Never mind, he needed to rush back and open shop.

While walking back to his shop, he was pondering how much to charge for a bowl of Fresh Water Hele.

Back in Heyang County, he sold it for ten coins a bowl, but Heyang flour was expensive, so the cost of one bowl of Fresh Water Hele was almost all flour, leaving very small profits. Selling a bowl didn't even earn him one coin; at best, it made half a coin profit.

That half coin was basically his hard-earned fee.

But here, flour was so cheap at seven coins per jin, one bowl of Fresh Water Hele required at most two liang of flour, costing just a little over one coin. Adding a bit for coal and seasoning costs, selling one bowl of Fresh Water Hele for three coins alone meant one coin profit.

Thinking this far gave him a fright.

After returning to his shop, while kneading dough, his mind was still mulling this over, distracted and unsettled.

Zhao Sheng grinned and asked, "Shopkeeper, what will you charge per bowl for Fresh Water Hele? Made up your mind yet?"

Liu You replied blankly. "Haven't decided yet... What do you think I should charge?"

Zhao Sheng said, "Maybe sell it for five coins? That should work."

Zhang Laowu nodded. "Five coins are around right."

Several other officers from the Discipline Committee laughed too. "Mm-hm, reasonable."

Liu You got a jolt, thinking to himself: Five coins? So for each bowl I sell, I could make three coins profit? Wasn't this about to make me rich?

He asked cautiously, "Won't five coins be too expensive?"

Zhao Sheng chuckled. "On this street, there's a shop selling southern rice noodles by Gao Laba, and he charges five coins a bowl. Yours is also a distinctive cuisine, not worse than noodles, right? So go ahead and sell for five coins a bowl, to compete head-to-head with Gao Laba, steal his business, and make him furious, ha-ha-ha."

Liu You replied hesitantly. "I'm an outsider... so openly taking business from locals? What if they call in eighty or so fellow townsmen to smash up my shop?"

Zhao Sheng laughed again. "That's overthinking it! Here in Gaojia Village, who'd dare commit such market bullying? Do they want to go to labor reform or not?"

Everyone else joined in laughter. "Ha-ha-ha, no one wants that."

Liu You asked, "So I'll fix it at five coins?"

Zhao Sheng replied, "Be bolder and shout out 'five coins'. Well, I'll shout it for you."

He ran to the shop entrance, hollering at the flowing crowd outside, "New Heyang snack shop open! Fresh Water Hele, five coins a bowl, five coins a bowl now!"

After this shout, an old man on the street immediately looked over first.

This old man was the Old Village Chief of Gaojia Village, wealthy but with nowhere to spend money, a sudden-rich type. Upon hearing about a new snack, regardless of what it was, he first grabbed a spot.

The Old Village Chief walked into the shop and plopped down into a seat: "Shopkeeper, give me a bowl."

From the distant shop, Gao Laba's head popped out: "Wow, Village Chief, did you abandon my shop today?"

The Old Village Chief laughed: "Eating your rice noodles every day, wouldn't I get tired of it?"

Gao Laba: "Huh? Yeah, I'm tired of it too. Fine, I'll close shop today and go try the new snack."

This fellow closed up just like that: with a clang, he shut the Laba Rice Noodles place, and followed into the Fresh Water Hele shop. He plopped down beside the Old Village Chief, banged the table: "I want a bowl too."

This startled Liu You: "Hey, hey, hey? What's going on?"

"What's wrong?" Gao Laba: "Don't you do business with competitors?"

Liu You's sweat poured down: "It's not that I won't, I just... felt... a bit panicked inside..."

No wonder he was panicking. As the Laba Rice Noodles shop closed, those wanting noodles couldn't find a place to eat. The braised duck next door was too costly, and the Fish and Shrimp shop opened by people from Bai Family Fortress wasn't cheap—not something for everyday. So a group turned their eyes and aimed for the newly opened Fresh Water Hele shop.

People kept entering the shop one after another, and kept taking seats.

Luckily, it was converted from a brothel, much larger inside than regular shops, fitting many. The ground floor filled up, and soon the private rooms upstairs were packed too.

Just for a snack, and they sat in private rooms like a big restaurant—it was a bit awkward.

Up and down, people on both floors waited for Liu You to cook Hele.

Liu You was super panicked, kneading dough frantically, boiling frantically, and scooping frantically...

This really wore him out hard.

He was running around busy top to bottom nonstop, until sunset finished. Lights turned on in Gaojia Business Circle, nightlife started, main diners were full, rubbed their bellies satisfied and left, and shop customers finally thinned a bit.

Liu You finally wrapped up, heaved a big sigh, sat behind the counter, massaging his aching waist: “I’m wiped out, almost broke my old back from bustle.”

By the shop door, a shadow flickered; Gao Yiye and the two women Qiu and Dong walked in. Seeing Liu You, Gao Yiye showed a gentle smile: “Proprietor, I heard you really opened a shop in Gaojia Village, so I came specially to visit you.”

Liu You stood fast and bowed: “Thanks to your pointer, miss.”

Gao Yiye: “So, how was business today?”

Liu You: “Huh? Just now I was swamped and didn’t count. Let me see how it went.”

He pulled open the counter drawer, looked inside: instantly drew a sharp breath. It was packed with copper coins, stuffed full.

All in one day! One single day!

Liu You shouted out loud: “I struck it rich, I’m rich! Hah, I’ll take the nickname Rich and Wealthy from now on.”

Chapter 380: We Are Just People with Overnight Riches

Liu You’s Fresh Water Hele shop made a crazy amount of money.

For several days in a row, the villagers of Gaojia Village stood in line to come try the novelty. Business was exceptionally good.

However, the overwhelming business also caused a minor issue.

The coal Liu You used to cook the Fresh Water Hele was coal he had brought by his own cart from Heyang County, along with his cooking utensils. How much coal could that little cart hold? It ran out in no time.

He now had to buy firewood from Gaojia Village’s “woodcutters”.

As everyone knows, the efficiency of firewood is no match for coal. Consequently, the cost per bowl of Fresh Water Hele increased...

Liu You began to miss the cheap coal back in Heyang County.

He thought about it and decided to just make a trip back to Heyang County.

He had come to Gaojia Village alone this time to scope things out. His wife and children were still back in the broken house in Heyang County. His plan was that if the Fresh Water Hele business couldn’t be done in Gaojia Village, he’d just load everything back onto his cart and head home. But if the business was viable here, he’d bring his wife and children over.

Now that his scouting trip was a success—Gaojia Village seemed like a place where he could make a fortune—there was no reason to hesitate. He definitely needed to go fetch his wife and children.

He might as well take the opportunity to haul back a big load of coal.

So he temporarily closed his Fresh Water Hele shop, packed some luggage, and prepared to head home. Just as he stepped out the door, a sudden inspiration struck him: “Wait! If I foolishly go back just to fetch coal, wouldn’t that be stupid? The grain price here is so cheap—only seven wen per jin. Why not bring some back? Hauling grain from here to Heyang County, and then coal from Heyang County back here... I could make a killing!”

Thinking it, he acted on it.

Liu You had earned quite a bit of cash during these days. He first exchanged it for more portable silver. Then he went to Gaojia Village’s “Village Grain Store” and spent the majority of his earnings to buy enough grain to fill three ox carts.

Next came hiring the carters.

Gaojia Village hadn’t had professional carters before, but after the connection to Chengcheng County was established, many carters came from the county town to Gaojia Village looking for work. They often handled shipments for Gaojia Village, mainly transporting the aid and food distributed by the Deity to small villages in Chengcheng County and the prison up in Huanglong Mountain.

Liu You had just hired three carters and settled on the price.

Then he saw a middle-aged man who looked like a high official, also here to hire carters. And this man’s scale was impressive—he hired dozens of carters in one go.

Liu You couldn’t help but ask the carters quietly, “Who’s that man? Seems like a big shot?”

The carters whispered back, “That’s the second most important person in Gaojia Village after the Saint Lady. He’s called Thirty-Two, everyone calls him ‘Third Steward’! He manages all the administrative affairs of Gaojia Village.”

Liu You was startled: That’s practically the magistrate of Gaojia Village, isn’t it?

While Liu You was murmuring to himself, Thirty-Two walked over and greeted him with a smile. “Huh? If it isn’t the owner of the Heyang specialty, the Fresh Water Hele shop? Why aren’t you open today? What brings you here?”

Liu You was taken aback that such a big shot recognized him. He quickly replied respectfully, “Reporting to Steward Thirty-Two, this humble one needs to go back to Heyang County to fetch his wife and children to live in Gaojia Village.”

Thirty-Two smiled warmly. “Bringing your wife and children? Excellent, excellent! Huh? But to fetch your family, hiring one horse cart would be enough. Why hire three ox carts? You’re trying to fit a square peg into a round hole here.”

Liu You heard a proverb he completely didn’t understand and saw Thirty-Two posing with a weird, pretentious expression. He felt a strong urge to punch him in the face. But since he was a big official, Liu You dared not. He could only explain, “This humble one reckoned, since the grain is cheap in Gaojia Village and expensive in Heyang County, he might as well trade some grain. Haul grain here over there, and bring back coal from there.”

Thirty-Two’s face brightened with another smile. “A good idea! Excellent! We think alike. See, the dozens of carts I’ve hired are all for that task.”

This sentence truly shocked Liu You.

Competition! And big competition at that. No, wait—actually, it was him who was competing with the big lord! Would the big lord get furious and have people beat him to death?

Liu You started to feel afraid.

Thirty-Two smiled reassuringly. “Don’t be afraid! Heyang County has over eighty thousand people. How can my few carts be enough? I won’t take all your business. You hurry up and set off ahead of me. If you get there first, you’ll get a better price. That’s called ‘to take the lead’.”

Liu You let out a surprised sound. “Huh?”

He hadn't expected that not only wouldn't the big lord be angry about him competing in the business, but the lord would actually give him suggestions. Everyone in Gaojia Village, from top to bottom, truly were good people.

Liu You gave Thirty-Two a deep bow, quickly gathered his three carters, and set off. Driving the three oxcarts laden with grain, they urged the oxen forward, hurrying back to Heyang County City. He knocked on the door of his own house.

The door opened. Liu You's wife appeared. "A'You? You're finally back! You've been gone for days without a single word. The child and I have been worrying sick every day..."

Liu You radiated happiness, grinning ear to ear. "Hehehe, Gaojia Village is a wonderful place! We're going to be rich! I'm back to take you and the child to Gaojia Village to live a good life!"

"What kind of fortune can we make with a small business?" Mrs. Liu shook her head. "Peace for our people is what makes a good life."

Liu You gestured proudly. "Look behind you! In just a few days, I've earned all this!"

Mrs. Liu looked past him. On the street behind Liu You were three oxcarts. They were piled high with sacks—three carts full of grain!

Mrs. Liu was utterly astonished. "This... this is all... ours?"

Liu You puffed out his chest. "Yes, it's all ours."

Heyang County now had an increasing supply of grain because Gaojia Village had been transporting grain continuously to pay the road construction workers their daily three jin of flour. But even so, the grain shortage remained significant, and the grain price stayed high.

Three cartloads of grain! This represented a huge sum of money in Heyang County!

The happiness hit too suddenly. Mrs. Liu gasped, clutched her forehead, and felt slightly dizzy.

“We’ll sell all this grain,” Liu You explained excitedly, rubbing his hands together, “then buy three cartloads of coal to bring back to Gaojia Village. After that, I’ll cook the Fresh Water Hele, you’ll help serve the customers. Our husband-and-wife shop is going to rake in the money! Henceforth, I’ll be called ‘Rich and Wealthy,’ and you’ll be ‘The Rich and Wealthy Wife,’ hahaha!”

Mrs. Liu looked torn between laughter and tears. “A nickname like that... isn’t it too much like those with overnight riches? It sounds awful!”

Liu You declared brightly, “But we are people with overnight riches! Since we are like that, what’s wrong with having a name that fits it? Would it be funnier if we pretended to be gentlemen instead?”

“This...”